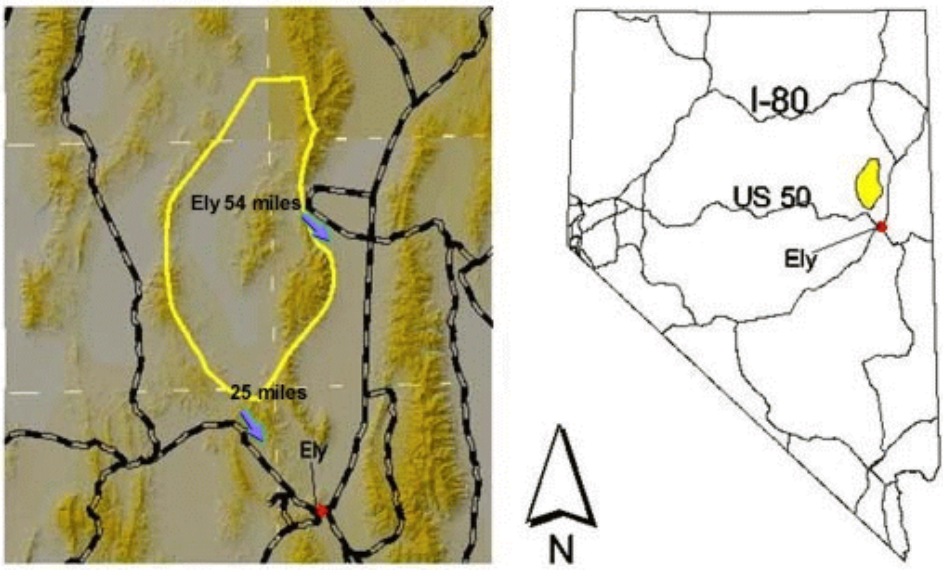
Butte Herd Management Area
White Pine County, Nevada

Location/Habitat

The Butte Herd Management Area (HMA) is located approximately 30 miles north-northwest of the town of Ely, Nevada, in White Pine County. The Butte HMA comprises approximately 430,770 acres (673 square miles), 99.3 percent of which is public lands. The area which includes the Butte HMA is very remote. Access to the HMA is accomplished via dirt roads and trails only. The only significant human settlement in the area, aside from a couple of small ranches, is the town of Ely (population about 5,400). The layout of the Butte HMA consists of one large valley bounded on three sides by large mountain ranges and the White Pine/Elko County line on the north end. The mountain ranges include the Butte, Egan and Cherry Creek Mountains. These mountain ranges have peaks exceeding 9,000 feet. The Butte Valley is wide and long. Its lowest elevation is around 5,900 feet and is marked by a large alkaline playa or dry lake bed.

Human interest in the Butte HMA has been historically limited to livestock ranching, hunting, prospecting, and firewood and pine nut harvesting. In recent years, outdoor tourism has become increasingly important, and eastern Nevada is evolving into an important area for those seeking vast unoccupied expanses of public lands.

The Butte HMA affords a classic Great Basin environment marked by extremes of almost every kind. Summer time temperatures can exceed 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and winter lows can fall to 30 degrees below zero. Precipitation in the Eastern Nevada region occurs mostly in the winter in the form of snow with sparse summer moisture. Moisture totals of over 12 inches are common for the mountains, while less than 8 inches may fall in the valleys.



Water is of critical importance to every animal in the Butte HMA. Water is very limited and occurs only at very few natural springs and a few man-made wells. There are no perennial streams or creeks in the Butte HMA. As a result of the limited water, the Butte HMA is prone to drought every few years. When this occurs, horses can rapidly cause extensive ecological damage to their environment as they stay close to water. The Butte HMA is home to numerous wildlife species including mule deer, pronghorn antelope, coyotes, jackrabbits, and numerous species of birds and rodents.

Vegetation

Vegetation in the Butte HMA is also characteristic of the Great Basin, with dominant plants having evolved to survive the extremes. Typical vegetation varies with elevation with upper mountain slopes generally brush covered with fir and mountain mahogany covering extensive areas. Through the mid elevations, pinion and juniper trees are dominant and often form closed stands which prevent other vegetation from growing. As the elevation and moisture supply falls, the vegetation shifts towards a shrub dominated community. Sagebrush is the most common shrub along the pinion juniper perimeter. Sagebrush gives way to white sage, black sage, saltbush and other "salt desert shrub" type communities. Salt desert shrub plants have evolved to deal with the highly saline soils which developed after thousands of years of internal drainage of runoff waters.

Herd Description

The Butte wild horse herd is managed by the Ely Field Office for an appropriate management level of 114 wild horses. This number was developed based on an evaluation of the horses habitat which indicated that between 97 and 131 horses could be sustained in the area without interrupting the delicate balance of the ecosystem. In order to keep wild horse numbers in balance with their environment, the BLM periodically gathers wild horses from the range and places them into the National Wild Horse adoption program. Between 1985 and 1999, a total of 398 wild horses were removed from the Butte HMA.

Wild horses in the area can be found throughout the HMA at different times of the year. Typically, horses will remain at the upper elevations during the summer as long as the forage and water hold out. As these resources are depleted, or when snow drives them down (as early as September in some years), they move off the mountain and into the valleys. Here they exist on the sparse grasses such as Sandberg bluegrass, needle-and-thread grass, and Indian ricegrass. In addition to grasses, horses in the region have adapted to a diet dominated by the dominant shrubs such as winterfat and saltbush.

The history of the Butte wild horse herd is somewhat clouded. Few people visited the area before recent times. The Pony Express trekked through the area, and is likely to have been a major source of horses during its decline. Ranches also no doubt contributed to the wild horse population during the late 1800s and early to mid 1900s. There may also have been transient horse management for the Army remount program which was active into the 1930s. Native Americans did not use the horse, and Spanish explorers never found their way into the area. Due to the probable ancestry of Butte wild horses, and the rigors of survival in this harsh environment, Butte wild horses can be very dependable, sturdy riding and packing horses. Average heights vary depending on whether horses were born during drought years or not, but tend to be around 14 to 15 hands. Colors are also variable, but are dominated by the darker black, bay, chestnut, and sorrel colors. Variations on these basic colors are common with white markings occurring on most animals.

Wild horse foals in eastern Nevada are born in the spring, mostly during the months of April or May. Births are timed to coincide with spring green-up which affords the most nutritious forage to nursing mares and foals.

Wild horses are very social creatures and are formed into what is known as a "matriarchal society." A matriarchal society is one which is led by a dominant female. This dominant mare is responsible for daily activities of the band. Contrary to popular belief, the stud serves the band in a secondary role only. He does influence the structure of the band and is responsible for gathering up the component mares and maintaining and protecting the group, but has little to do with daily activities. Bands can range in size from two to more than twenty animals. Wild horse bands generally consist of one dominant stud, and one to several unrelated mares. Offspring either wander off or are forcibly ejected from the group before becoming reproductively mature to limit inbreeding. Young mares which leave their parental band are quickly gathered up into surrounding bands, while young studs join together into bachelor groups. Young studs will remain in bachelor herds for several years until they are mature enough to take their own mare group.